

The academic mobility in pandemic times: the impact on Sapienza University of Rome students' lives

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Abstract

According to the European Commission statistics, taking a mobility period abroad may prove to be an important experience not only by an academic point of view but also by a personal perspective. In this sense, the impact of studying in another European and extra-European University can be seen in the increasing technical skills, individual competences and attitudes that, in most cases, helps students in finding their first-job more easily after the graduation. Following these premises, this case study research wants to explore, thanks to the availability of primary data collected in 2021, the impact of the academic mobility on Sapienza University of Rome students' personal development. In this respect, data on the mobility impact will be analyzed taking into account the type of the mobility experienced by students. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic indeed, mobilities could also take place in virtual and blended modality.

Keywords: *Erasmus+; internationalization; higher education; personal development; outgoing students; Italy.*

1. Introduction

In the last decades, an ever greater number of students experienced a mobility period abroad within the higher education system: indeed, the expression “academic mobility” (or student mobility, in a narrower sense) refers to the possibility, for students, to move to other institutions abroad for thesis research or study purposes. In this respect, the exams taken at the partner University will be fully recognized upon the students’ return at the home University.

Thanks to this opportunity, as underlined by the European Commission in the Report *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study* (2019), the students who completed an Erasmus+ mobility period for studying or training in another University improved their professional and occupational skills with benefits in inter-personal and inter-cultural competences too. In this sense, the aim of the mentioned research, based on almost 77.000 survey responses with reference to the years 2014-2018, was to assess the impact of academic mobility on staff, students and higher education institution, so demonstrating how the mobility experience increases not only the students’ employability but also personal and individual features such as self-confidence, social openness, cultural viewpoint (Almeida, 2020; Pustulka and Winogrodzka, 2021).

Indeed, as far as the employability and transversal abilities is concerned, European Commission put in evidence that around 80% of Erasmus+ graduates found their first job after graduation in less than three months while 72% of them reported that Erasmus+ had been useful in finding their first job. On the other side of the coin, that is the personal enhancement, European Commission emphasizes how the mobility process, in addition to the transmission of new teaching methods and learning practices (two out of three Erasmus+ students started to use new learning methods during their stay abroad), facilitates in fostering social cohesion and in accepting different social values since about 95% of interviewed students agree that mobility period taught them to better get along with people of other nations and to improve their ability to take cultural differences into account. Therefore, there is evidence to suggest that spending a mobility period abroad helps to reduce discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia and racism (Devlin *et al.*, 2017).

For this reasons, following these theoretical premises, the aim of this study is to investigate the mobility impact on the personal sphere of Sapienza University of Rome’s students.

2. Mobility flows and mobility effect: Sapienza University of Rome’ case

Following the European Commission’ statistics, Italy is one of the main countries that experienced increased mobility flows over the years. Analyzing these data more in detail, it is possible to note that, in 2020, 93.688 participants in 1.087 Italian projects benefited from mobility in higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult learning and youth for a total grant amount of €175.56 million (European Commission,

2021a). In this context, Sapienza University of Rome is characterized by being, together with the Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna and the University of Padua, among the top three sending institutions (European Commission, 2020) and this is the reason why it was decided to carry out a case study, that can be useful for understanding specific educational contexts (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013), in this specific University. Besides this, Sapienza University of Rome constitutes one of the most important Italian higher education institution in Italy: indeed, founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII, it is the oldest University in Rome and the largest University in Europe and, at the present time, it is composed by 11 faculties, 58 departments with a total of 3.341 academics and 116.928 students enrolled. As regards the international dimension of this University, that is the topic of this paper, Sapienza University of Rome records 10.008 enrolled international students and 3.700 Erasmus students every year, thanks to the 1.085 agreements signed with partner university in 86 countries. In this respect, students who decide to do a mobility period abroad, could benefit of a wide choice of mobility programmes offered by Sapienza University of Rome, such as the Erasmus+ Programme countries (E+ UE) for study and traineeship, the double degree agreements, the bilateral agreements for student exchange with non-EU universities and the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility.

However, in line with the results described in the *Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study* (2019), also in this case all these programmes support students in gaining skills in order to improve their professional development and deepen their understanding of other cultures (Suárez-Ortega and Riskey, 2014; Teichler, 2017). This issue has been shown by the output obtained by a quantitative web survey launched in november 2021 to all the Sapienza students (outgoing students) who did a mobility period abroad during the academic year 2019-2020. In this respect, it is of fundamental importance highlighting that not all of the students, due to the Covid-19 pandemic restriction, had the possibility to spend a physical mobility period at the hosting institution, attending classes or carrying out research activities/traineeship in presence (European Commission, 2021b; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021). Therefore, the collected primary data, which are related to 514 replies, will take into consideration the type of mobility (physical, virtual or blended). Even though these data are just descriptive, they help understanding how the mobility modality impacts on the students' personal development, despite no completed data are available for both a national or international comparison with the exception of the researchs aimed to investigate the more general consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mobility plans and expectations (Bista, Allen and Chan, 2021).

2.1. Sapienza students' choices: why study abroad

The first question addressed to Sapienza outgoing students' aimed to explore the underlying reasons for doing a mobility period abroad. Looking at Table 1, it is possible to note how the desire of learning/improving a foreign language (also by attending a study programme in a

different language) and the opportunity to live abroad and gain knowledge of another country are the keys of this choice (respectively, 24% and 19% of the total number of the responses and 70% and 55.4% of the total number of the cases); on the contrary, the possibility of building a personal network does not seem to be attractive to students (4.1% of the total number of the responses). Nevertheless, deepening this aspect by taking into account the degree cycle, results show that PhD students are more likely to spend a mobility period abroad in order to experience different learning/teaching/research programmes and/or methods (87.5%) and to build up a personal and professional network (41.7%), so confirming the inclination toward the field of research expanding the own academic network also from the international point of view as well. Conversely, single-cycle degree students (80.5%) prefer to spend a mobility period in another University in order to learn/improve another language while bachelor students (62.3%) and master students (55.8%) choose to study abroad predominantly for living abroad and gaining knowledge of a different country.

Table 1. Main motivation for going abroad (including blended or only virtual mobility)

Variable	% of responses	% of cases
To learn/improve/follow a study programme in a foreign language	24.0	70.0
To live abroad, meet new people and gain knowledge of another country	19.0	55.4
To develop soft skills, such as adaptability, problem solving, curiosity, etc.	17.9	52.1
To experience different learning/teaching/research programmes and/or methods	18.6	53.7
To enhance my future employability (in my home country or abroad)	16.4	47.6
To build up a personal and professional network	4.1	12.1

Source: Authors own elaboration

2.2. Sapienza students' experience: the pros of studying abroad

As far as the benefits of the academic mobility is concerned, Figure 1 shows, according to the type of mobility experienced, that not all the students underline the same positive aspects of their time abroad. Results, obtained summarizing the responses of the Likert items “rather agree” and “strongly agree”, put in evidence that doing a physical mobility at the hosting institution, attending classes or carrying out research activities/traineeship in presence records the highest values on most of the elements considered in the scale, specifically in

finding solutions in difficult and/or challenging contexts (95.1%) and in appreciating the value of different cultures (94.2%). The same pattern is also observed by considering the students that attended a physical mobility at the hosting institution but attended classes virtually, even though, differently from those who participated in more activities physically and much more in line with students who did a virtual mobility without moving to the country of the host institution, they state that the mobility period not trained them in expressing the own identity creatively (75.7%) and in working in team (63.6%). Moving to analyzing the impact of the blended mobility on student's personal development, it is possible to note that students who attended classes both virtually and in presence in the country of the host institution, are more similar, in certain respects, to students who did a physical mobility attending classes in presence. However, these students, much more than the others, declare that this kind of mobility helped them in planning and organizing tasks and activities (91.8%) and in working in team (80.3%). Finally, virtual mobility, typical of those who never moved to the hosting institution, record the lowest values on most of the items, mainly with reference to the expressions of the own individuality creatively (66.7%) and to the thinking logically and drawing conclusions (66.6%). Nevertheless, if the absence of intense contact with both professors and colleagues has determinated these feelings, on the other side of the coin, it can be assumed that this could also incremented the predisposition to plan and organize independently tasks and activities (86.7%).

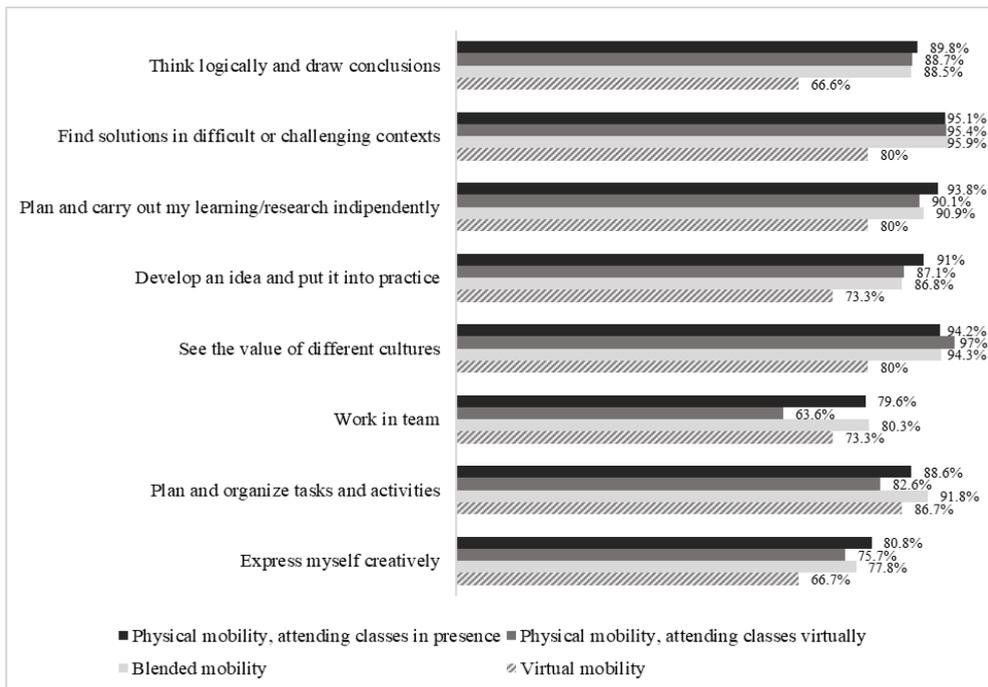


Figure 1. Impact of the academic mobility on students' personal development. Source: Authors own elaboration.

2.3. Sapienza students' ambitions: how the mobility improves the professional career

As regards the labour sphere, another specific question aimed to investigate how the Sapienza outgoing students think the mobility period abroad helped them in finding a job or in improving their employment condition. In this respect, results seem to confirm the general trend above showed since students who moved to the country of the hosting institution, attending classes in presence, are more confident than the others of their job opportunities. Observing the data presented in Table 2, even then obtained summarizing the responses of the Likert items "rather agree" and "strongly agree", it is possible to underline that 87% of them believe that their chances to get a new or better job have increased after the mobility, 85.3% think that are more capable of taking over work tasks with high responsibility, 81.2% have a clear idea about the professional aspirations and goals and 67.7% presume to have better opportunity for jobs in the home country. Approximately, the same values could be observed with regards to the students who did a blended mobility; conversely, students who experienced a physical mobility participating virtually at classes are more in line with students who did a virtual mobility. In this sense, both record lowest value in the Likert items concerning the clarity of their professional aspirations (respectively, 75.7% and 66.7%) and the idea of having a better opportunities in the home country (64.4% and 60%).

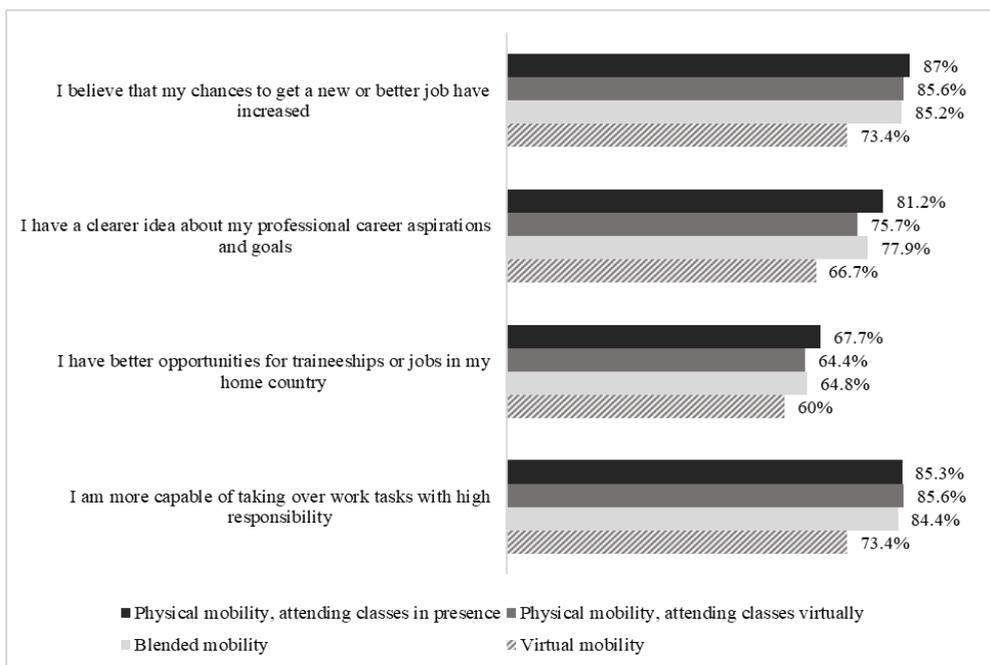


Figure 2. Impact of the academic mobility on students' job opportunities. Source: Authors own elaboration.

3. Conclusion

In the recent years, several studies have shown how academic mobility contribute to individual growth and in helping students acquiring skills in order to improve their professional development (Valle, 2011; Stavem, 2014). However, following the Covid-19 restriction, not all the mobilities were held in presence and an ever increasing number of students experience a mobility period in other modality, such as the blended mobility or the virtual one. That is the basis on which this research has been carried out, with the aim of explore if all these types of mobility have the same impact on students' personal and occupational dimension.

The results that emerged from the survey conducted in 2021 on a sample of 514 students of Sapienza University of Rome have revealed that the greatest impact of the mobility occurs for those who did a physical mobility and attended classes in presence and for those who did a blended mobility, part of which took place in presence. On the contrary, virtual modality of the academic mobility seems to penalize the students in almost all of the aspects, starting with a reduced interaction with others that causes lack of dialogue and exchange of ideas up to a realist awareness of having, compared with those who did a physical mobility, less opportunities in working life.

Overall, taking into account all these issues, asking them “*How satisfied are you with your mobility experience in general?*”, students who declare to be completely satisfied of the mobility period are almost 70% of those who did the exchange period attending classes in presence compared to 33.3% of students who experienced the virtual modality; in this vein, only 0.4% of students who move to the host institution attending classes in presence do not recommend this experience to another student, compared to the 13.3% of students who have done a virtual mobility.

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